

WORK IN PROGRESS:
A COLLECTION OF NOVEL CHAPTERS, SHORT STORIES, AND A
SCREENPLAY EXCERPT

by
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A thesis submitted to The Johns Hopkins University
in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing

Baltimore, Maryland
May 2021

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Abstract

“Work In Progress,” is a collection of unpublished fiction pieces looking for a home, including chapters from a young adult novel – about a white teenage boy who learns the Native American origins of the sport of lacrosse; short stories on childbirth, parenthood, and sports; and a screenplay excerpt for a movie set near the author’s hometown on Long Island.

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Introduction

Writing is hard. Frustrating. Thankless. Low paying in most cases. Never perfect. Why should anyone do it? Yet I told myself, years ago during my undergraduate college days, that I would write for a career as long as I could. There is just something about putting together the best story that you can, creating something that wasn't there before, leaving something behind for someone else to read with your name on it, and learning a ton along the way. And every so often, though not enough, you get a sense of pure satisfaction that you can't do it any better — like that one great shot during a round of golf that keeps me coming back to the game despite the anguish it can easily offer.

I have been writing and editing non-fiction for more than a decade, publishing work in newspapers, websites, and magazines, and helping others polish their own stories and articles. But, several years ago, I felt like I still hadn't fully committed to the writing life — I had largely self-taught myself and wondered if I might have been “missing something” that was preventing me from getting to the next step in my career. I finally applied to the Johns Hopkins Master of Arts in Writing Program in non-fiction.

Through the intense reading and writing exercises of my early non-fiction classes, I learned new ideas, but I also found a sense of comfort that I wasn't really far from where I wanted to be. This life *is* what I thought, but it's simply about sitting down and doing the work, even if I never feel satisfied or win any awards. I can only do the best I can. With that realization made, I felt compelled to try something new, something that I found I *had* been missing. I had never tried fiction writing, the books I began reading as a kid.

Over the last few years, as I've immersed myself in fiction classes, I felt like I've been exercising an entirely different set of muscles just to get a story onto the page, much less one that includes the critical elements of effective fiction. Characters yearning for something. Conflict, which needs to be first imagined in my head, something I usually try to avoid, must make it on to the page. Compelling stakes are a must. In these ways, I think writing about real people is easier, as these traits eventually emerge if you ask the right questions. But, importantly, I have found that in writing fiction I can express emotions that, for most of my life, I have been hesitant to share. Writing has always been an easier way to express myself than talking, to allow me to collect my thoughts, write them down, and then edit them to the clearest language I am capable of producing, whatever the form may be.

The following collection, "Work in Progress" represents a selection of my first attempts at fiction, all written since 2018 in the Johns Hopkins Master of Arts in Writing Program. They are as they are labeled, works in progress. These unpublished pieces include chapters from a young adult novel — about a white teenage boy who learns the Native American origins of the sport of lacrosse; short stories on childbirth and parenthood; flash fiction pieces on everyday wisdom and golf; and a screenplay excerpt for a movie set near my hometown on Long Island.

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A Chapter from *The Medicine Game* (Novel)

“Pass the ball! Pass the ball!” Coach Taylor yelled from the sideline.

I sprinted through the center of the field, just past the midline, carrying the small white rubber ball in my lacrosse stick, and quickly scanned the field. Through the facemask of my helmet, I saw green grass and an open path to the goal. Pass the ball? No, I had to score. Three long days of tryouts in the summer heat were coming to an end, and I desperately wanted to prove that the coaches should choose me to wear a blue and gold jersey given to the best young lacrosse players in central New York. I wanted to be an Elite Eagle.

“Parker! Here! Here!” Trevor, off to my left, said. He held his stick, in perfect position above his right shoulder, his top gloved hand holding the stick two-thirds of the way up and low hand near the bottom end, ready to catch. Coaches’ pet. Trevor shook his stick like a rattle, signaling he was open.

But the goal was open right in front of me too, about fifteen yards away. The orange metal posts and the threaded white net was begging me to give it a ball, to shoot and score. I loved being the one to make it happen. My friend Charlie, standing in goal in front of the net, was supposed to stop the ball, but he wouldn’t be able to get in front of the shot I was about to throw toward him.

“Parker! Motion! Motion!” Coach Taylor screamed from the sideline. I looked over. He wore a blue and orange Syracuse visor on his head, always representing his alma mater where he played, dark sunglasses and a smear of thick white sunscreen on his

white nose. And of course he wore a Blue River Eagles Lacrosse Club dri-fit t-shirt and black shorts. His summer uniform.

He wanted me to run the play. He always does. Motion. Each of the six offensive players on the field was supposed “get a touch,” Coach Taylor always said, before anyone took a shot at the opponent’s net.

But I was so open. I just scooped up a loose ball near midfield and the defense is still confused and slow to match up with us on offense. A gangly defenseman, who I didn’t know from last year or the year before on our team, slid a bit closer to me, but I juked past him and ran toward Charlie in the goal. Just a few yards from him, I pump faked with my right hand and then threw my favorite behind-the-back shot around the left side of my helmet. The ball went right through Charlie’s legs, not exactly where I was aiming by good enough to get past his oversized goalie stick. Had an announcer been watching, he might have said it was like Lyle Printup, the great Native American player. I heard about him on TV.

The ball hit the back of the net and I tiptoed around the crease so I didn’t get a penalty. Goal. Then I heard a whistle and whipped my head back to the sideline.

“Parker! What are you doing?! We wanted to run motion! We just talked about this! And not only didn’t you do it, you passed up an easy goal too because you wanted to showboat!”

Coach Taylor paced down the sideline toward me.

“Get off the field! Billy get in!”

“What?” I yelled back at the coach. “I scored!”

“Get off the field, Parker! When will you learn?!” Coach Taylor snapped back.

I honestly thought this was my best way to make the team. To show him I could score as many goals as we needed to win. And to show off my skills. Nobody else could do what I could. Motion was just a boring way of saying everyone had to touch the ball, including Billy, Coach Taylor's son, who was probably one of the worst players on the team.

"Off the field?" I said.

"Yes!"

I sat on the bench. Billy, of course, did as he was told. He passed the ball to Trevor, who tossed it to Nick, who threw behind the net to Coty, who gave it to Connor, who threw it back across the field to Toomey. Toomey was huge, the biggest kid on the team. Nobody could stop him.

Goal. On the crease.

"Nice work everybody!" Coach Taylor said from the sideline, and blew his whistle again, this time to end the tryout practice. "Time to stretch!"

The 40 of us who were trying out for this year's edition of the Elite Eagles gathered in the center of the field and spread out around the warm grass in a circle, like we always did to start and end practice. The summer sun beat down on us. Coach Taylor patted the top of Billy's fluffy brown hair, encouraging him after he took off his helmet, and I sprawled out on the field like everyone else to stretch my hamstrings. Coty, the skinniest and youngest kid on the team, a giddy sort with freckles, blue eyes and blonde hair, couldn't help himself and scooped a ball lying on the ground and fired it twenty yards into an empty goal before he lay down. Toomey went for the water jug on the

sideline. “Benched, huh?” he said as he walked past me. “Did you see what we did? That’s how you’re supposed to do it.”

I kept stretching and took off my helmet. Sweat dripped from my hair. We were probably on the field for 90 minutes straight. I laid down in the grass and stared at the clouds above, exhausted but still optimistic about making the team despite Coach Taylor pulling me off the field. He’s done that before, but has put me back in. And I’d been one of our leading scorers the last two summers. I even won MVP at the Wood Stick Classic, a big deal. We traveled all the way from central New York to Florida for those games. Flew down and everything. *Everyone* came to that tournament to play, and *all* the college coaches watched. But I was too young to be recruited last year. This year would be different.

“I can’t wait to go to Florida again,” I said to Connor, sitting on his butt in grass not too far away from me, stretching his arms.

“It’s going to be awesome,” he said.

During the last few years, Connor and I usually roomed together during road trips to wherever we played that weekend.

“Remember Colorado?” I said, laughing.

“The vending machines!” Connor said. “When Peter got his hand stuck in the one in the hotel.”

Coach Taylor blew his whistle again to get everyone’s attention. “All right, everyone. Take a knee,” he said, and he gathered us around him near the center of the field.

“I know a lot of you guys have played with the Eagles for a long time, but you guys know that we can’t keep everybody on the team this year,” Coach Taylor said. “We just don’t have enough spots. Remember that. But I want to thank each of you for trying out. We’ll post the list outside the Food Shack in 10 minutes.”

Everyone knew what The List was. If your name was on it, you made the team. Coach Taylor would hand you a fresh blue and gold Elite Eagles jersey that you could wear all summer long. You’d go play in the best tournaments in New York, and even other states like Maryland, Connecticut and, like I said, Florida.

I was excited for all of that. Of course, if your name wasn’t on the list, you wouldn’t get to experience any of it. And not everyone hanging around The Food Shack right now, waiting to see the results of our three long days of tryouts, would make the team. Only 25 would. I was sitting with Connor and Coty at a picnic table in the shade while we waited for Coach Taylor to tell us The List was ready.

“I’m so nervous,” Coty said. “I don’t know if I’m going to make it.” He kept twirling his stick in his hand. This is why we called him Jitters. I finished a gulp from my water bottle and looked at him from my seat on the bench of the table.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re all good.”

My watch showed 2:57, seven minutes since Coach Taylor said he’d have the list ready. Just then, he appeared from behind the tiny brick building where we usually bought hot dogs and sodas from. He blew his whistle and got everyone’s attention, no matter how far away they were. “OK, we’ve posted the list,” he said. “It’s on the piece of paper on the door back here. If anyone has questions, ask me.”

Connor, Coty, and I darted as fast as we could from our table to the shack, but still a few others beat us to the front of the line. A white piece of paper was taped to the green door. On it, were names and jersey numbers written in black marker. I watched from behind Connor and Coty as the first few ran their fingers down the page, while yet others crowded next to and behind us as if we were all looking for autographs from our favorite player after a game.

I stood on my toes trying to get a peek over Coty and Connor's heads. "Yes!" Coty said when he got the front of the line. He'd made it. Connor said the same. "Me too!" and they got out of the way. Finally, I ran my finger from the top of the paper where it said Elite Eagles 2020 to the bottom, looking for my last name and jersey number amongst the other S last names from those who were trying out.

Sheffield, 27... Solomon, 28... Swafford, 30...

L, M, N, O, P... Q, R, S, T, U, V, W... I ran through the alphabet in my head. I should have been after Danny Solomon. I looked again up and down, maybe they just wrote it out of order. I had to be there. But I looked, and looked again, and I could not find "Stevens" or my tryout number, 29, anywhere on the list. Then somebody shoved me from behind. "Move it, Parker," Toomey, the big lug, said and knocked me to my left out of the crowd. I gathered my balance as I exited the fray and saw Connor and Coty looking at me. "What happened?" Connor said, "You didn't make it?"

I shook my head from side to side. "I'm not there."

"What?" Coty said, "You have to be."

"My name's not there."

"Go check with Coach Taylor," Connor said. "Maybe it's a mistake."

Maybe, but all I felt like doing was walk back toward the picnic table. How would I explain *this* to my dad?

Another Chapter from *The Medicine Game*

Writer's note: Before this chapter, Parker, the protagonist of the story, is told by Oran he must get a wooden stick from the reservation's longtime Stick Maker if Parker is going to be allowed to play in a traditional medicine game of lacrosse a week from today. At this point, Parker's mom is getting gravely ill and his dad is in jail for a DUI arrest and Parker is living with Oran and his family on the Onondaga Nation, adjacent to Parker's hometown of Blue River, New York. A medicine game is spiritual and has roots in the Native American origin story – that Native Americans play with the idea of healing the sick who cannot play anymore.

###

This is the place where anyone around here gets a wooden stick made, from The Stick Maker himself. Alf Lacroix is a name, Oran told me. But I'm nervous to ask. I arrive at the workshop in the woods just as the sun is going down. As I pull up to the small building – essentially a two-car garage – one of the garage doors is open, and a light dangling from the ceiling inside illuminates the opening amid the darkness. I see what appears to be an old man. He's carefully working with a piece of wood so intently that I don't want to bother him. But I came a long way uphill on my bike – I'm still out of breath – and I need a stick, a wooden stick, one made right here on the reservation if I'm going to be able to play in the medicine game.

My stomach quivers with jitters, like just before a game. With my knuckles, I rap on the siding that frames the open garage door, lightly. The old man looks up from his workbench on the right side of the shop. He pauses what he's doing: twisting a crank that he's using to bend a piece of wood around an oval-shaped metal frame to shape the head of a wooden stick. *He's making a stick right now.* The Stick Maker has a gray beard and ponytail, and he's wearing a white long-sleeve t-shirt that says Iroquois Lacrosse on it in purple, blue jeans, and old ratty white sneakers.

"Hey there," he says softly. "Can I help you?"

I didn't mean to interrupt him.

"If you're busy I can come back later," I say, standing in the door frame.

"Did I sound like I was mad, son?"

"Are you Alf?"

He must be the Stick Maker. I need a stick if I'm going to be able to play for my mom, and maybe heal her. And play for my dad, and maybe heal him too. I need one just to play in a game at all at this point – to maybe get noticed by somebody, who maybe knows somebody else, who knows a college coach who can recruit me. Because I'm not going to play for the Eagles this summer, that's for sure.

"Just give me one second. Come in."

There are three big workbenches in the middle of the room and sawdust covers most of the concrete floor around them. On one wood-paneled wall, hook-shaped wooden lacrosse sticks with long shafts hang from knobs, like pieces of drying meat. Shelves, stacks of lumber, and old lacrosse memorabilia dot the walls. In one corner, there's an ancient-looking blue World Lacrosse 1990 banner and a purple and white Iroquois flag

hanging next to it. The place smells like the newly-oiled baseball glove I used to have when I played Little League. One small window in the back of the place provides only dark winter light through the blurry glass. It doesn't look like the window has been opened since before I was born, actually.

I take a seat on a wooden bench near the hanging sticks. It's a work of art, just like the sticks. The bench is smooth, covered in a clear glaze, but not too thick that you can't see the contours and knots of the piece of wood that Alf, presumably, made it from. The bench is shaped so my butt cheeks fit in it, and wide enough for four cheeks, two people. And right in front of me, the Stick Maker – he looks younger than my grandpa, but old – is working on his next project. He's bending wood, and tightening the clamp near the curly part of his oval jig, taking deep breaths while he does it. He finally snaps the clamp shut. "All right," he says. "That's going to be there a while. Good timing."

The Stick Maker stands up from his stool walks toward a workbench along the wall. He moves slow, has a little limp, and is kind of big. Not fat, but he's shorter than my dad and wider. He grabs a yellow legal pad from the mess on his table, and a pen, and starts asking me a few questions as he sits on another stool near the desk.

"What's your name?" he says.

"Parker," I say. "Parker Stevens."

The Stick Maker looks me right in the eyes, then up and down. I wonder what he thinks of my Nikes. At this point, I'm guessing he's wondering why a white kid rode his bike all the way up here looking for a wooden stick.

"You Native?" he asks me.

I was waiting for that question. I've asked it myself nearly every day since I can remember learning I was a quarter Onondaga.

"Yes, believe it or not," I say, and wait for more questioning to begin. I know I don't look Native, brown hair, blue eyes and light skin, but I'm not stereotypically white-looking either. But I've spent more of my time off the reservation than on, though that's changed just recently. Maybe I'm not carrying myself like a Native. But the Stick Maker asks something that I'm not expecting.

"Wait, Stevens? Is your dad Geno?" he says.

My mind went from being pleased that the Stick Maker was considering me Native, to wondering what he knew, or how well he knew, my dad. That scared me and surprised me.

"Yes," I say, again waiting for some more questions. "I am. How did you know that?"

"This woodworking stuff keeps me pretty sharp, thankfully," the Stick Maker says. "We're not a big group of people, you know. You look like you had a chance to be Geno's boy, if you know what I mean, after I heard the name. Good guess, I guess. Good man, your dad. How's he doing? And your mom? Oh, I remember her. I love that lady."

"You haven't heard?" I say about my Dad. Is he the only one on the reservation and Blue River that hasn't? Maybe the news hasn't traveled this far up the mountain. I don't see a TV or computer in here, though there is an old phone on the wall.

The expression across Alf's weathered face as I explain that my dad's in jail and how he got there looks like somebody just hit him in the gut with one of his wooden sticks. "And my mom," I say. "She's OK, I guess. Though we're not sure where we're

going to keep living yet, and she's having trouble getting home from a trip she went on before my dad was arrested. That's why I'm here with Oran now."

"I'm sorry to hear all that, about your Mom and Dad."

I'm sorry for it too. I get up from the bench and start gazing at the sticks hanging from the knobs and otherwise laying around the shop tables, and the one the Stick Maker is working on now. They're all mostly the same color.

"What kind of wood are these made from?" I ask.

"Hickory," the Stick Maker says. "All hickory. From a single piece of wood."

"How do you make them into sticks?"

"Well, there's a long answer and a short answer there," he says. "A lot of work, a lot of patience. You said you're looking for one?"

I tell him about the medicine game, that Oran and his family have planned for me, how they took me in after my dad was arrested. And the lengths they went through to organize the game and despite the objections. And that I need a wood stick to play.

"Wow, that's rare," The Stick Maker says. "You know that they don't do those for everyone, right?"

"I've learned."

"You must be a special kid," he says.

"You're the Stick Maker!"

He laughs. "Call me Alfie."

I walk toward Alfie and his desk.

"How did you find me?"

"Oran told me where I should go."

“You rode your bike all the way up the hill?”

My legs were still hurting a bit from the trip here, but it wasn’t that bad, about a 10-minute ride from the bottom of the reservation and paved the whole way.

“And when’s the game?”

“Next week.”

Alfie laughs again, and it doesn’t sound like a good laugh.

“You see that one over there right now, the one I was working on when you got here?” he says, “That takes six months from start to finish.”

“Six months?”

“It takes some time.”

“They won’t let me play without one.”

I pick up a stick – tall and smoothly shaped – that is laying against the wall by Alfie’s workbench.

“These are all for other customers,” Alfie says, motioning his hands to the sticks behind him and the one in my hand.

I’ve never held a wooden lacrosse stick before. It’s heavy. From head to shaft it’s about the length of my leg, a perfect length for me. The shaft is smooth, no splinters like I expected. There are a few scuff marks on the white wood, which I like. Like it’s been somewhere before.

“This is new?” I ask.

“Yes, they’re all new.”

“Why are they here?”

“Sometimes it takes them a while for people to get here to pick them up.”

The stick was at least twice as heavy as the titanium and plastic stick that I usually played with. I grab the bottom of the shaft in one hand and put the other halfway up, and take a couple ghost tosses with it. In the head, again, all wood. And the pocket was made from leather instead of nylon. A pair of initials, J.T., branded where the head meets the shaft. This was a pure traditional stick, the one I could only imagine the Indians played with hundreds (or thousands?) of years ago. I'm holding a piece of history that nobody else knows about. "This stick can take you places." Oran's words are in my head.

If this stick could only get my dad out of jail, my mom out her bed, even me out of here right now. Alf meanders from his desk toward his jig. I can't put the stick down, and twirl it a few times. Gravity makes the heaviest part of the head land toward the floor when I spin it.

"This is an amazing stick," I say.

His back is to me, and he turns around.

"Could you put that back for me?" he says, kindly.

I put it back where I found it. While I have my back turned on the way there, he says, "You're really playing in a medicine game?"

"I think so," I say, now sadly empty-handed.

"You know that's the ultimate honor," he says. "You're playing for the Creator. You're playing to honor the game, your family and for medicine, for everyone else who can't play."

For a moment, I forget why I'm here and just soak in Alf's words. I could listen to him talk all day long, but back to the issue at hand.

"That's why I need a new wooden stick," I say.

“Slow down, son. First off, you don’t *need* a wooden stick. If someone’s putting together a medicine game for you and your family, they will either find you a wooden stick or you can play with your own, if that’s what suits you.”

“But that’s what Oran told me.”

“There are exceptions. You’ll learn that in life,” he says.

I scan the workshop. There are probably two dozen sticks in here right now.

“You’re saying all of these are other people’s sticks?” I ask.

“Don’t push it now, kid,” he says, getting bristly for the first time like my Dad does. “Some of them are, some of them are finished, others are not.”

He sits down at the stool near the jig where he was when I got here and starts loosening the tension on the crank. The butt end of the stick he’s been working on bends back skyward while most of the head remains wrapped around the oval piece of wood that he’s bending it around. He takes it off the jig and holds it up.

“See that, I have to do that about 100 times just to get this one right.”

I was starting to get the idea and head back toward the bench to sit and think.

“Wait, did you say a new stick?” he says. “Oran said you needed a *new* stick.”

“Yes,” I say.

“You don’t need a new stick. You just need a wood stick.”

“Right. A new wood stick,” I say.

“Right,” Alf says, “New to you, but not new to me.”

He was right. I came up all the way up here thinking I needed a brand new stick when I just need to maybe borrow or find one to use.

“Do you have any used ones?” I say.

The Stick Maker gets up from his stool, carefully grabs his work-in-progress, and places it on the lowest, empty shelf along the right side of the room and slowly walks back across the room to his messy desk. He's looking at his pad of paper.

"Listen, I can't make any promises, but let me call a few people and I'll see what I can do," he says and looks up at me.

This sounds good. I think I just came up with a good idea, and jump excitedly from my seat.

"You mean you can get me a stick?"

He asks for my phone number and address. I give him my cell phone number and Oran's address, since that's where I plan to be for the next week at least. And he writes them down on his pad.

"And when is the game again?" he asks.

"Next Saturday. Thank you, thank you."

I pick up the same stick I was handling before and hope to have my own soon.

"Don't thank me yet," Alf says. "And put that down. Didn't I say that already? It's not for you."

The ride down the hill back to Oran's is a lot easier than the trek up. I keep hitting the brake with my hand, so I can slow down and make sure I don't crash while the cool summer night air hits my face.

I cruise past the small houses on both sides of the road, though every once in a while a big one pops up with big windows. In the driveway of one of the larger houses, I see a father getting home from work, it looks like, and his kid greets him at the front

door. My dad is probably eating disgusting peas and carrots delivered to him in his jail cell right now. My mom is hopefully on a flight from Europe, closer to home than the day before.

It's darker now and the faint streetlights only do so much to guide the way. At this time of night, I sometimes wonder if a bear or something is going to pop out from the woods. If it did, I would have to ride fast. Pink light appears in the sky. I get back down to the bottom of the hill, turn onto Oran's block, pedal past the tall trees into the end of Oran's gravel driveway and hop off my bike.

I'm walking it toward the garage door, when a pair of lights splash my shadow on the house, like I was just found by a helicopter or something. "Hey," the voice yells as I turn around, a bit startled. It's Oran, with his head slightly out of the driver's side window of his car, driving slowly toward me. "Where's your stick?"

The Wise Man and the Fool

The question grabbed my attention.

“In a conversation between a fool and a wise man, who learns the most?”

“The fool, of course,” I said.

Joe smiled. I’d met him a few minutes earlier in line in Stanford Creek’s Main Street bagel store. We were both ordering a late breakfast, close to 11 o’clock, with the sun high in the sky on this summer weekday, warming the concrete sidewalk outside the glass front windows and doors of the strip mall.

I only knew of Joe what I saw: a salt-and-pepper beard and dark sunglasses on a bald white head; a dark blue t-shirt with a Tommy Brothers construction company logo on his left breast.

He told me he worked with the company and was renovating the house over on Oakwood Drive. After a few general comments about the project, suddenly we were having a philosophical discussion. We were strangers, but I knew enough to recognize what Joe’s grimace, in response to my answer to his question, signaled.

I might be the fool.

“It’s the wise man, ain’t it?” I said.

As if he were reading from a fortune cookie, I’ll never forget the words Joe spoke next.

“The fool is a fool because he doesn’t know how to learn,” he said. “The wise man is wise because he does.”

The words struck me as more valuable than the \$3.99 I was spending for my bacon, egg, and cheese on an everything bagel with ketchup, salt, and pepper.

I reached into my pants pocket, took out my phone, and Googled to find who said that before. Who would have thought? Joe, the bagel-loving, homebuilding, philosopher-king. I was pleased to meet him.

Mom

Mom rarely complained about her condition, despite it being what many people may consider terribly unfair. For years now, she lay in the nursing home bed, unable to move any body parts but her arms and her head if you helped her. Her body, representative of a squash-playing, middle-aged woman as recently as 10 years ago, had now incrementally shriveled to 60 pounds. It's true, but hard to believe. She lived this way for nearly two years. The nurses and aides kept most of her lower body covered, with white medical-grade blankets and in the winter a purple Baltimore Ravens quilt. But you could see the multiple sclerosis, mostly in her exposed arms and neck, protruding from her t-shirts. Her muscles had atrophied, disappearing over the last few years like a slow-melting Popsicle stick. A thin layer of white skin, lined in places by light blue veins beneath, now covered the outline of her forearms, elbows and clavicle bones. If you hadn't known we were in the United States in the year 2020, you may have thought she was left for dead in the desert of a third-world country and hadn't sipped a drop of water in months.

Her face was thin too, her cheekbones becoming more prominent, and she had more strands of gray in her dry black hair these days, but when she spoke and shared her soul, you wouldn't have known she was sick. Her mind remained healthy, sharp, and beautiful when her body allowed her to stay awake and oriented. Despite the obvious physical limitations, she was the most positive person I had ever known, and spent her days talking to friends on the phone even if she had trouble finding the device in her bed.

"Wonderful, wonderful," she always said when I asked how she was doing. This attitude is why people gravitated toward her, why a grocery store manager near our house

who met Mom thirty years ago as an entry-level employee still remembers her. He asked about her the other day when I was buying bread, after he saw her resemblance in me. Despite the image I'm painting of Mom, usually when I spoke to or was with her it was the brightest part of my day. She ended calls by often repeating, "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you." She accepted her situation long ago. But occasionally the cost of this wretched progressive disease overwhelmed me. Sometimes I stood beside the bed in her room when one of her aides turned her body every few hours to prevent blisters from forming on her skin. Mom wore pain in every part of her face then. She winced, let out a faint sigh, and prayed for it to be over soon if one of the women helping her wasn't quite gentle enough with what was left of her legs and hips.

In my rare, quiet moments, when my anxiety disappears without me even knowing it, when my husband is happy and working and my daughter is in bed, I think to myself what all my friends probably think but are too kind to say: *I'm too young for this*. I'm 35 years old. But then I think of my Mom. It doesn't do any good to sulk, and more importantly anyway, Mom is too young for this. She's 67. I've known it's been coming since I was a kid and she started using a cane, then a wheelchair, then moved into her own apartment with help, then got an infection one day and got into bed and has barely left the last two years. In some ways, the slow, inevitable demise has made this all a bit easier to stomach, but maybe that's me rationalizing. I am going to miss my Mom. I already do.

My Long Trip Home

My world has been dark for exactly 270 days when all of a sudden I start sliding from my sack. Is it broken? I think so. I've been slipping, lower and lower, without any way of stopping for several hours now. Things are getting more and more out of my control.

I start to feel a strange sensation on the top of my head, like a cool breeze. And I hear: "Push! Push! Push! I can see the head." It's an unfamiliar voice, deeper than the woman I'm used to hearing, the one who has asked me to kick on demand for the last few months.

I'm sliding more now, like I'm about to go somewhere. My head is sticky. "She's got so much hair," the unfamiliar voice says. "OK, here we go. One, two, three, push."

Loud noises. I move a little bit more. I feel more coolness on my head, and then a strange liquid hits my mouth, something I haven't tasted before. This doesn't seem like a big event at first, until I realize I can't breathe.

"One more time. You're almost there," the new voice says. "Push." I see flashes of light. I feel the cold, cold air. I'm out of my sack. My comfy, reliable home. *Where am I?*

Then everything goes dark. I gasp a little bit for air, and feel the liquid inside of me.

I tried to cry but I couldn't.

I feel new things touching me. Something is on my tongue and is in my throat. I can feel the liquid coming out, but not all of it. My lungs are pumping hard, my heart beating fast. I can feel my stomach expanding and contracting violently.

I'm on my side now. The liquid is falling out of me. *Oh, thank God.* I start to see flickers of light again, bright light.

"What's going on, Trevor?" the familiar voice screams. She sounds far away. "I don't know, Jamie, I don't know," the other voice says, closer.

"She just needs some help," I hear another lady whisper. It goes dark again. *Is she talking about me?!*

There is light. When I wake up, I'm in a glass case. I lay on my stomach, my head craned, and I'm wrapped in a few blankets. I'm breathing easier now. Slower. More controlled and steady. The last of the fluid is almost out. And I can see light.

I've got long things in my arms and in my nose, but they don't hurt, thankfully. But whatever machine is nearby keeps beeping, and beeping, and beeping.

The doctors keep coming over to check on me. They were worried about an infection, I overheard. I want to tell them I feel fine. After a few hours, one of them finally, gently rolls me on to my back. "She's so alert," she says. "So cute."

A familiar voice breaks up the monotony of the machines and background noise that I'm sick of hearing. "Where is she? Where is she?" It's her, shouting with excitement.

I want to kick like I did when I was in my sack, when I heard her voice, but I can't with all the stuff on me.

The top of the glass case opens. I feel some pressure on my back and shoulders and butt, and then suddenly I'm eye to eye with her: "Maggie, it's me, mommy."

She's crying, a lot, and someone is next to her. "Hey, it's Dad," he says. "How are you doing?" His voice sounds familiar too. I was right, thinking that there was another person involved in me being here.

Dad's not saying much, but is crying, too. "Trevor, isn't she the fuckin' cutest thing you've ever seen?" Mommy says, tears dripping from her cheeks. "Take a picture, take a picture."

That's how I found out I was a girl.

Every so often, one of the nurses wearing a blue uniform came over. They were so nice, these nurses. I didn't even have to ask for anything. I slept. I peed and pooped, and these ladies changed my pants. I ate, and they fed me, when Mommy wasn't doing it herself.

After a few more naps, the nurses took me from the glass case and put me in a crib in a new room with a few other babies. I was getting so much attention.

Usually, Mommy and Dad were there, their big heads blocking out what became a familiar, ugly background of the hospital ceiling. If not, one of the nurses was smiling at me.

Finally, after one of my naps, Mommy looked at me and said, "It's time to go home." She picked me up gently, and placed me in a padded seat resting on top of the linoleum floor. The seat had a big handle attached to it above my head, and straps that clicked me in tight.

The nurses gathered around my crib and me and told Mommy and Dad a lot of parting instructions.

Everyone was so happy. “We’re going to miss you!” one of the nurses said. “But it’s so great when you can go home.”

Dad carried me in the padded seat with the handle to the front door of the room, which was bigger than I thought. I saw other babies still in their cribs, others still in their glass cases.

Down the hallways we went. They looked a little familiar, but I wasn’t sure. Bright light appeared on my horizon. “I’m going to get the car,” Dad said, and he handed me to Mommy near a window before reappearing a minute later.

I sneezed. Everyone laughed.

Next thing I know I woke up and Dad is staring at me, and something little, white and fluffy is in my face. I feel the slime on my cheek. “Manny! Be gentle,” I heard Mommy say, out of my view.

It was love at first sight. Manny and I stared at each other. I smiled and he barked.

He barked and I smiled.

“You’re home,” Mommy told me. I couldn’t see very far to see what that meant. Dad grabbed me in his arms as he stood up. He carried me up a flight of stairs to a room that was painted light pink. I guess they knew I was going to be a girl.

There was a crib. A chair. A changing table. Everything a baby could ever want or need.

I heard some chimes downstairs. Mommy’s phone was ringing, and Dad and I went back downstairs to meet her, and we watched. Mommy started shaking hysterically

and crying, running her fingers through her long black hair, like we were back in the hospital again.

“More tests? What’s wrong with her?” she said.

I had no idea who she was talking to and could not hear what they were saying, but it seemed important.

“We have to go back? Oh my God, Oh my God.”

Dad has one arm around Mommy, and me in his other one.

“Trevor,” Mommy says, “Something’s wrong. We need to go back. One of her tests came back positive, for the infection. They think it’s a false positive, but said we need to be re-admitted.”

“Re-admitted? For how long? They just said she was cleared.”

We’re all back at the hospital now, in the long room with the other babies in cribs and the glass cases. I’m lying back in my crib as the doctor explains to Mommy and Dad what’s happening.

Usually after 48 hours if one of these tests comes back, it’s a false positive. I’ve never seen one come back that wasn’t. Unfortunately, it just happened right after you left, that we got the result back from the lab.

But we do need to do another blood test.

“Is she going to be OK?” Mommy’s asking Dad, saying the words through hysterical tears (again).

One of my nurse friends in a blue uniform explains to Mommy that “She’ll be fine. This is not life-threatening.”

Mommy exhales the weight of 1,000 elephants out of her chest and from her shoulders. “Oh my God, you mean she doesn’t have a blood disease.”

No, I didn’t, but a doctor came over and told Mommy and Dad he needed to take blood from my foot. They could stay if they wanted; wouldn’t take long. But it did. This was the first real pain I remember feeling in my life. The doctor kept poking and poking, and not saying anything.

I must have been crying pretty bad, because Mommy left quick – “I can’t watch this,” she said – then Dad stepped away, too. I kept thinking of Manny, licking me. Man, that little creature is cute. Finally, it was over.

I got a lot of visitors over the next few days. Grandma and Grandpa, and Aunt Debbie and PopPop, who was so silly and accidentally spit out his gum on the floor when he saw me. That was the first time I heard Mommy laugh; it sounded like suffering donkeys gasping for air.

Three days later, I’m back in the padded seat and carried down the hallways again. We get in the car once more and go back home. Manny seemed to remember me, and Mommy and Dad wrapped me in blankets, fed me, and changed my pants, just like the nice nurses did.

I knew I would be fine, and I was. It just took a little bit longer for everyone else to figure it out.

Go! Go! Go!

I'm sitting here on the floor holding one of my favorite books, *Llama Llama Loves To Read*. And I want mom or dad to read it to me. I talk, as best as I can. I can't do any better.

I know they can hear me, but when I look around the room, it doesn't look like they do. Dad is on the couch looking at the screen in front of him and mom is in the chair, doing the same on the smaller screen in her hands.

Fine, I'll just read this thing by myself. There's Llama Llama learning at school. Flip to the next page. There's Llama saying the alphabet. A, B, C! Flip. There's Llama learning words at the table with his friends.

I flip to my favorite page. The teacher holds the sign and says, *Go, go, go!*

I kind of get what's happening, but it's way better when mom or dad are reading it to me. "What are you doing, daddy?" mom says, as I'm flipping to the next page. "Maybe you can read to her?"

"No," he says. "I'm doing my work." That doesn't sound good. I know what no means. They tell me that before I hurt myself, usually. But I want them to read to me. Hello? I make the loudest sound I can.

Mom, of course – like she usually does – joins me on the floor. I crawl close to her with the book in both hands then climb into her lap as she starts reading. "Llama Llama learns at school..."

Flip. The alphabet. Flip. Words. D-O-G. C-A-T. L-O-V-E. "Words are the very best of presents," mom says, "Words together make a sentence!"

“Oh,” I say. Then it comes again, my favorite page. “Teacher holds the walking sign,” mom says. Wait for it. “Now it’s time to make a line.” Wait for it. “How does Llama Llama know? G and O spell Go, Go, Go!”

“Go, go, go!” I say. I hear dad laugh. I see mom smile. I knew it would happen. It just took a while.

The 12th Hole

One forty-eight to the pin. The breeze kisses your face. You're probably between an eight and a nine today. The hole is five off the right. Forty-two to cover the bunker. Drops off quick off the right. Nine? Sure, I like that. Might end up a little short but you'll be below the hole. Wind is gusting a little. Look at the tops of the trees. But nine is good. Might have a ten-footer coming back on your shortest end. How much are you up right now? Do you really want to know that? You sure? All right. Two, I think, from what I saw on the board back on 11. Smith's up ahead and was three under. Eight? Yep, I like it too. Yes, really. Few years ago, bud, it might have been nine all the way, but not anymore. The wind might knock it down anyway, but three-quarters or so swing. Rather be short than long or right. You can get it close. The wind's about five in your face right now. Yep, you got it. Eight, a little off. Love it, man. Trust it.

Saving Fire Island

EXT. OPENING SCROLL/COMMUTE - EARLY MORNING

We begin with a view of Fire Island's trademark lighthouse - a black and white striped column, large at the base and skinny at the top and attached to a small wooden building. As dawn breaks, the bright rotating light atop the structure shines in the same spot every few seconds. The Atlantic Ocean is in the background, and the beach, dunes and shrubs below.

This island is a busy place in the summer, filled with tourists and vacationers ranging from young traditional families to gay couples, all staying at various beach homes in towns across the barrier island, each with their own personalities.

But, no matter the town, the houses, homely bungalows all the way to million-dollar beach mansions, are mostly quiet in the early morning. You can hear the ocean waves crashing onto the beach. And birds chirping to tell each other they made it through the night. A pair of deer walk along one of the island's trademark concrete walking paths. There are no cars.

We see a wooden sign, "WELCOME TO OCEAN BEACH: Fire Island's Best" and - just beyond it - in front of a carry-out deli window, we meet KEVIN STEVENS, a 65-year-old, 250-pound-ish white man of Irish descent. He has salt-and-pepper hair and is wearing a hooded Stevens Construction sweatshirt, shorts and sneakers.

A worker behind the deli's carry-out window hands Kevin what looks to be a tinfoil wrapped breakfast sandwich and a hot to-go cup of coffee.

MAN BEHIND COUNTER

There you go, Kev. Have a good one.

Kevin puts some cash on the small window counter and grabs his coffee and the sandwich.

KEVIN

Thanks, Tommy. See you later.

Aided by a cane in his hand, Kevin walks a few feet to a parked golf cart. Construction equipment fills its bed. A sticker on the cart reads Stevens Construction. Kevin sits in the driver's seat, turns the key and hits the gas pedal with his good leg.

A few paces into his trip, Kevin begins to unwrap and eat a bacon, egg, and cheese, and ketchup sandwich. Houses line the path on both sides.

EXT. McNULTY JOB SITE - FRONT ENTRANCE. MORNING

Kevin sees LUIS ROJAS, 20s and Hispanic, wearing a t-shirt, shorts and work boots, leaning against the wooden front gate of a small, one-story shingle-style bungalow. Kevin parks his vehicle.

KEVIN

Had I known you'd be the early bird today, Luis, I would
have brought you a sandwich.

Kevin lifts himself from the driver's seat, and walks toward the small front-gate of the property.

LUIS

No worries, Mr. Stevens. I just —

Kevin takes a key off the chain on his shorts, but is startled at something on the front gate.

KEVIN

Were you already in there?

LUIS

Me? No. I just got here.

KEVIN

Why's the lock open then?

LUIS

Maybe one of us left it open last night?

KEVIN

Maybe. But look, the front door is open, too.

We see the front door of the house slightly ajar.

Kevin grabs a hammer from the bed of the golf cart, then pushes the gate open quietly. He nudges Luis to follow him up a up a wooden walkway to the house's front-door.

KEVIN

(just above a whisper)

You go around the back and see if you see anything. I'll go through here and meet you inside.

Luis goes around the side of the house.

INT. JOB SITE - FOYER. Day

Kevin pushes open the front door quietly and enters the home. The kitchen is under construction. The rest of the house is in normal shape.

KEVIN

(yelling)

Is anybody here?

We hear a rustling off screen. A can falls and sounds like it's rolling on a wood floor.

Kevin moves toward a bedroom door and hears low voices on the other side. Luis meets him.

LUIS

There's towels and stuff on the back deck, too.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN

(clearer sounding but still from the other room)

We got to go now.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

(also coming from the bedroom)

What? What do you mean? What time is it?

KEVIN

(more yelling, concerned)

Who's there?

INT. JOB SITE - BEDROOM. DAY

Kevin busts open the door to find a half-naked, athletic-looking mid-20s white man, standing next to the bed. He's pulling a great-looking mid-20s white girl wearing only her underwear from beneath the covers.

Luis stands at the doorway.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN

Oh shit. Time to go, time to go.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

(startled and to Kevin)

What is going on? Who are you?

KEVIN

(red in the face and angry, to the man)

What the fuck? How long have you been here? I oughta kill you.

The man collects the woman's clothes from around the room, and pushes her toward the door. A comforter is wrapped around her body.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN

(to woman)

Let's go. You got to get out of here.

They pass Kevin and Luis.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN

(to Kevin)

I'm sorry.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

This is so weird. What's going on? Patrick, is this your house?

Luis is behind Kevin, laughing.

EXT. JOB SITE - FRONT ENTRANCE. DAY

The woman begins to put on the party clothes that appear to be what she wore the night before.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

What the hell, Patrick. Is this not your place?

The man is PATRICK STEVENS.

PATRICK

Yes and no. I'll explain later. Let's just get out of here.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

I'm not going anywhere with you.

PATRICK

Oh, c'mon. Let me walk you home, at least.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

I'll do the rest of the walk of shame myself. Who brings someone to a stranger's house?

PATRICK

It's not a stranger's house. And, I mean, you were pretty drunk and said you couldn't go home. This was the only place we could go.

KEVIN

(yelling from inside)

Patrick!

Kevin appears at the front door.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

You know him?

PATRICK

Dad, I'll be right in!

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

Dad?

Patrick freezes, not sure what to do.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

He's your dad? What the hell? This is so weird.

PATRICK

Wait, wait, wait. I'll explain.

The woman is now dressed and gets away as fast as she can to the front gate.

Patrick chases her as she walks down the sidewalk.

PATRICK

(yelling as she walks away)

Talk to you later?

About 20 yards away now, the woman does not turn around.

Patrick walks back up the front walkway toward the front door and Kevin. His hands are on his hips.

PATRICK

I'll explain.

KEVIN

Jesus Christ, Pat... Stop right there. Bring me my coffee
and sandwich. It's the cart.

INT. THE JOB SITE - KITCHEN. DAY

Patrick enters the kitchen under construction with Kevin's coffee and food. Near
the cutout for a sink, Kevin is giving Luis directions about installing faucet hardware.

KEVIN

(exasperated and making eye contact with Luis)

You got to be shitting me, Patrick.

PATRICK

What? I mean, did you see her?

KEVIN

(frustrated)

Yes, I saw her, Patrick. Almost all of her. But you scared
the shit out of me...

Patrick hands Kevin the coffee and sandwich.

PATRICK

I'm sorry. I kind of had no other choice. She said she
couldn't go back home and I couldn't bring her to our place.

KEVIN

So here? McNulty's? What if I were Mr. McNulty instead?
They're coming back today. Not only is it just wrong, we'd
have lost this job too because of your shit again.

LUIS

Dude, you're in McNulty's bed with this girl. There's family
photos right next to you.

Kevin stares at Patrick in disgust. He's disheveled and his eyes are bloodshot, and
he spots a family photo on the wall in another room in view.

PATRICK

Not a bad looking family.

KEVIN

(glaring)

Christ.

LUIS

(chuckles)

Did you at least get her number?

PATRICK

What do you think?

LUIS

No.

PATRICK

You're right. At least I don't think I did.

(checks cell phone)

Kevin grabs a tool belt from the kitchen's center island, walks past Patrick and hits him in the stomach with the belt and holds it there.

KEVIN

All right, get to work. You've got the other two counters - they're out back. Then start cutting the tile for the backsplash. Luis will do the sink. McNulty's will be here this afternoon. I told him the big stuff would be done by then.

PATRICK

OK, you got it. I'm sorry, dad.

Kevin heads toward the exit of the kitchen.

PATRICK

Where are you going?

KEVIN

I've got to go meet with Peter.

Kevin takes the last bite of his sandwich, throws a ball of tinfoil in a garbage can.

EXT. JOB SITE - BACKYARD. DAY

On the back deck of the house, Patrick and Luis head toward a pile of supplies covered by a blue tarp.

A makeshift bed of out-of-place beach towels and seat cushions are laying in the middle of the deck.

LUIS

Scene of the crime, man.

PATRICK

(laughs)

We started out here. Ended up in there.

LUIS

I give you credit, dude. I could never pull off that shit. And
at a job site? Damn. How drunk were you? We left at like
one and you were fine.

Patrick kicks the towels and seat cushions out the way on the way to the supplies.
He and Luis pull the tarp off to reveal two pieces of granite countertop.

PATRICK

Things escalated quickly after you left. Billy started
handing out shots... Let's do the big one first.

Patrick bends at the waist near the end of a long countertop opposite Luis.

PATRICK

One, two, three.

They lift on counter on the count of three and walk it a few feet toward the
backdoor in unison, Patrick in front, Luis at the back.

EXT. JOB SITE - BACK ENTRANCE. DAY

After a few successful steps, Patrick stubs one of his flip-flop clad feet on the
door jam. He stumbles, and drops his end of the counter. We hear a loud thud as it hits the
floor just inside the back door.

PATRICK

(yelling)

Goddamn it.

The corner of the counter is chipped and cracked, as is the floor where it landed.
Luis is still holding his end of the slab up high outside on the deck.

LUIS

Oh no.

Luis puts his end down and rests the counter against the inside of the door jam.

PATRICK

(deep breath then whispers)

Fuckin' a.

INT. PETER'S OFFICE. DAY

In a tiny office near the Ocean Beach town ferry dock on the bay side of the island, Kevin sits in a chair across from the desk of PETER WEST, a fast-talking skinny white man in his 50s.

Peter paces behind his desk and talks on a cell phone. Kevin checks his watch.
His holds a cane between his legs.

PETER

Yeah, yeah, we'll be there at three. Yes, I'll pick up wine.

Peter hangs up the phone and sits down.

PETER

Sorry. My better half. We're going to Tony's later.

Kevin smiles.

KEVIN

Lady trouble?

PETER

Always.

KEVIN

So, what's the story?

PETER

Well, not good. I've run all the numbers and bottom line

Kev, you need better cash flow.

KEVIN

You're kidding, Pete.

PETER

The math just doesn't work. What's been going on lately?

I've never seen it like this.

KEVIN

I know, me either. I don't even have any big projects lined
up past McNulty's place.

PETER

I know it usually gets a bit slower when summer starts.

People don't want you swinging hammers when they're
around or renting their places, but—

KEVIN

This year it's been really bad. Economy and such.

Everybody's struggling.

Peter looks down at his legal pad and laptop.

PETER

I think you can find a way to get expenses down to \$15,000 a month. But income's already down to \$12,000. I don't see how you can keep everybody on staff, and have enough for yourself and Patrick and retirement.

KEVIN

Forget retirement... You're telling me I can't make payroll?

Peter hands Kevin a piece of paper with a new proposed monthly budget. Kevin reads it over.

PETER

You can cut some costs on supplies and delivery, but—

KEVIN

You're telling me I have to lay people off?

PETER

You know I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just telling you the numbers, Kev. Unless you get another project...

KEVIN

I get it.

Kevin folds up the paper and puts it in his shorts pocket and rises with help from his cane.

EXT. FERRY DOCK. DAY

Kevin exits Peter's office to see the two-deck blue and white Fire Island ferry, named the Fireball, pulling into the dock.

Once DECKHAND 1 and DECKHAND 2 secure the boat to the dock's pilings, the CAPTAIN exits the wheelhouse and slips through a guardrail on the bow and lands on the dock, a few feet away from Kevin.

The captain is a male in his 40s and wearing a denim button-down shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers. He approaches Kevin.

CAPTAIN

Hey Kev. Top of the mornin' to ya.

KEVIN

Arthur, how's the old Fireball?

CAPTAIN

(now closer, and softly)

I gotta tell you, there's these guys on the boat... I mean, look.

FOUR WHITE MEN, good-looking and middle-aged, Nordic-looking almost, wearing black khaki pants and black quarter-zip pullovers, emerge from the side-door opening of the boat.

KEVIN

These guys?

The large logo on each of the men's shirts reads CUNNINGHAM BUILDERS.

RICH CRAFT, the town's mayor, about 65 years old with a tan of someone who has lived his whole life at the beach and a thick head of white hair, greets the oldest man of the group. He has slicked back dark gray and black hair.

CAPTAIN

Why the hell is Rich picking them up?

From a distance, the Captain and Kevin watch the four men exchange brief pleasantries with Rich. Two men, including the oldest gentleman, get into a town-issued golf cart with Rich in the driver's seat.

The other two men get into a second cart with RICH'S LACKEY, a 30-something portly bald man.

RICH

(loudly and looking behind him to his lackey)

C'mon numbnuts.

Everyone besides the lackey laugh hysterically. The carts drive toward Kevin and the captain.

Rich gives them a wave as he drives past. On the chest of the man in the passenger seat next to Rich, Kevin spots a script BRUCE near the Cunningham Builders logo on his shirt.

RICH

Hey fellas.

As they drive off, the Captain turns to Kevin.

CAPTAIN

Cunningham Builders? Where are they from?

KEVIN

They're big-time builders in the city, mostly. What the bejesus are they doing here?

INT. McNULTY JOB SITE - KITCHEN. DAY

Kevin arrives and sees Patrick and Luis are working on the backsplash in the McNulty's kitchen. Only one piece of countertop is in, along with the sink hardware.

KEVIN

Why are you guys doing the backsplash already? Where's the other counter?

PATRICK

We just wanted to get the small ones in first and finish everything on this side at once.

KEVIN

Why the hell would you want to do that?

Kevin walks through the house toward the back deck.

EXT. JOB SITE - BACKYARD. DAY

Kevin removes the tarp from the pile of supplies and discovers the other counter, cracked.

KEVIN

(yelling loudly inside)

Jesus, fucking Christ. Patrick. You know how much this costs? Goddamn. I can't afford this anymore.

INT. JOB SITE - KITCHEN. DAY

Patrick exchanges glances with Luis.

INT. JOB SITE - FOYER. DAY

Kevin is re-entering the house's back door when ROBERT McNULTY, 60-ish, athletic build and wearing a golf shirt and shorts, arrives at the front door. Robert is joined by JENNY McNULTY, a cute dirty blonde in her 20s, dressed casually in a summer beach dress.

ROBERT

Hey Stevens crew, how's my beautiful kitchen coming?

He walks toward the kitchen.

INT. JOB SITE - KITCHEN. DAY

PATRICK and LUIS

(startled)

Hey, Mr. McNulty!

ROBERT

You surprised? I said I'd be here, and shit, I'm here, barely.

We teed off at Bergen Point at 9 a.m. Woodsy stank up the

course so bad, I almost missed the 2:45 boat here. Last time

I play with him.

Kevin walks in shakes Robert's hands. Jenny talks in the background to Luis. We don't hear them.

ROBERT

Oh, looking good, looking good. Perfect. I can cook everything I ever wanted here. Patrick, maybe Jenny will even invite you over for dinner when we're done.

JENNY

(yelling)

Dad, I heard that.

KEVIN

It's coming along, Bob. Right on schedule. Glad you like it.

Robert takes a check from his shorts pocket and hands it to Kevin.

ROBERT

Here you go. It's all there. Three thousand, right? For those counters?

KEVIN

Right. Thanks.

PATRICK

When are you guys going to stop paying in cash like you're in the mob or something.

Robert turns to Patrick.

ROBERT

Speaking of money, Pat, you still studying for that CFP?

Jenny and Luis join the group around the center island.

JENNY

You're going to be a financial planner? You? Patrick
Stevens?

PATRICK

I'm thinking about it. Yes sir, whenever I get the chance.
I'm probably going to take the test at the end of the
summer.

LUIS

It's true, he's been studying, like the good old days of Bay
Shore High. Ah, memories... What were you ranked in our
class again?

PATRICK

God, how many times do you need to tell this story?

LUIS

What were you?

PATRICK

Eleventh.

LUIS

And by like a decimal point from the Top 10. And he didn't
even try that hard.

PATRICK

Yeah, and now I'm here, hanging out with you bozos every day and night.

ROBERT

Let me know when you pass the test. I might know a few people that can help you find something. There are a *few* perks of living here your entire life, you know what I mean?

PATRICK

I do, I do, Mr. McNulty. Really appreciate it.

At that moment, Kevin falls suddenly to the plywood floor. He's sprawled out, but eyes open and breathing. He's shaken.

Patrick bends down over his father's mid-section, as if he's a doctor, and grabs his arm. Jenny backs away from the scene. Robert bends down over Kevin's face. Luis enters the kitchen.

ROBERT

Shit, Kevin, you having a heart attack?

KEVIN

(embarrassed, yet not surprised)

No, my leg just gave out. I'm all right.

ROBERT

Here, I'll help you up. Crap.

Patrick grabs one of Kevin's arms and Robert's grabs the other as he gets to his feet. Patrick grabs his father's cane and puts it back in his left hand.

PATRICK

(to everyone)

His M.S. It happens sometimes.

INT. AT HOME. NIGHT

Patrick lay in bed, two hands holding open a thick textbook, titled CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER (CFP) EXAM PREP.

His smartphone buzzes on his nightstand. Patrick shuts the book, and looks at his phone screen.

[Note: Text messages are in italics]

LUIS

Dude, I know you said you weren't coming out tonight, but

I think your girl is here.

PATRICK

Who?

LUIS

The one from last week.

PATRICK

I'll be there in 10 mins.

Patrick grabs a fresh shirt and pair of shorts from his closet and gets changed.

Down the stairs and in the house's open-concept main room, Patrick walks past his dad, who is sitting on a couch watching television.

KEVIN

Going out?

PATRICK

Yeah, you all right?

We hear a crack of a baseball bat on the television.

(TV announcer)

That is deep... See ya! Home run Aaron Judge to straightaway centerfield.

KEVIN

Man, that guy can rake. Yeah, I'm fine. Make sure you actually come back here tonight, or at least don't go to McNulty's, please.

INT. THE INN. NIGHT

Patrick arrives at the front door of the Inn, a popular bar on the town square. He walks to a circular table where Luis, LUIS' BOYFRIEND, and their friend BILLY WEST, mid-20s, wearing a red-and-black flannel-style shirt, black hair and scruff, sit, drinking beers.

BILLY

Thank God you're here. I'm getting tired of third-wheeling it.

Jenny, wearing a t-shirt and short khaki shorts, arrives with a tray carrying three new beers.

PATRICK

You know I didn't come for you, bud.

JENNY

Who'd you come for?

LUIS

Her. (points to Unidentified Girl)

The girl Patrick had over at McNulty's house is dancing with her girlfriends in the middle of the dance floor.

JENNY

Her? City girl. Of course.

PATRICK

How do you know that?

JENNY

She ordered a dirty martini. And her friends were talking about their runs on the Upper West Side.

PATRICK

Ah, interesting. Runners. Can you get me a... Jack on the rocks?

Jenny gives Patrick a dirty look.

JENNY

(sarcastically)

Coming right up, sir.

BILLY

Very proper of you there, Jen.

JENNY

Shut up, Billy. Why are you here anyway on your night off?

BILLY

You think I have anything else to do? Plus, I'm kind of entertained by these guys at the bar.

JENNY

Who?

Luis and his boyfriend take a swig from their bottles of beer and head to the dance floor.

Billy and Patrick are now alone at the table, Jenny still standing nearby.

BILLY

Who? The Icelandic looking dudes. They like the bad guys from The Mighty Ducks.

We see the four men from earlier in the day, wearing Cunningham Builders gear, drinking at the bar.

PATRICK

Quite the specific reference there.

BILLY

I actually served them the other night and we got to talkin'.

Turns out these guys are with a fella, Bruce Cunningham,
from the city. I know because he's the one who put down
the card.

We hear joyful screams from the dance floor. Luis and his boyfriend are gyrating
wildly in a group with the unidentified woman and her friends. Some are capturing the
scene on video on their phones.

PATRICK

Why are you telling me this?

BILLY

I'm getting to it... I overheard his friends saying he wants to
buy those empty lots on the edge of town near Jenny's...

JENNY

What?

BILLY

And build a big-ass house.

JENNY

By the dunes and the firehouse? They're protected, they're
part of the park. That would never happen.

BILLY

I know, I know, that's not my point. But I'm just telling
you. These guys said he wanted to buy those lots and a few

others and build a goddamn road right down the middle
from lighthouse all the way to here.

PATRICK

What? That's insane. Not the first time we've heard the
idea, though.

JENNY

My dad would probably keel over if that happened. He
hates if the out-of-towners interrupt his "retirement peace
and quiet." I can't imagine a road. He'd probably lay in it.

Luis' boyfriend is doing the worm on the dance floor. Brittany and friends are
laughing hysterically.

BILLY

The point is, Mr. Bruce handed me two hundred in cash for
a \$75 tab.

PATRICK

OK...

BILLY

I gave him back \$125 and told him he must have gave me
an extra hundred on accident. And this guy looks at right in
the eye and says, "Keep the change."

PATRICK

Well, shit. That's a good tip, Billy.

BILLY

Best one I've EVER gotten. Anyway, keep an eye on these
guys. I can't believe you don't know about them yet. Maybe
your dad does. Like, why do they travel in a pack?

We see the four men guffawing together and cheers-ing drinks.

Luis and his boyfriend are dancing hysterically in the middle of a circle.

PATRICK

I don't know. Why do we travel in a pack?

Author's Biographical Sketch

Corey P. McLaughlin is a writer and editor based in Baltimore, Maryland, with more than 10 years of professional experience. He is a senior contributing writer to the award-winning *Baltimore magazine*, and his work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsday (N.Y.)*, *Chesapeake Bay Magazine*, and other publications. He currently works full-time for Stansberry Research, a global independent publisher of financial research, where he writes and edits a daily newsletter emailed to more than 400,000 paid subscribers in over 30 countries. He is also the former deputy editor of *Lacrosse Magazine*, the flagship publication of US Lacrosse, the national governing body of the sport, and was previously editor of LaxMagazine.com. Before pursuing a M.A. in Writing at Johns Hopkins, a pursuit of which this thesis is a culmination, he graduated from Penn State University in 2008 with degrees in journalism and anthropology. He also covered football and other sports for *The Daily Collegian*, the award-winning independent student newspaper. He is originally from Bay Shore, New York, on Long Island and now lives in Baltimore with his wife and 1-year-old daughter. This is his first collection of fiction.